Taking Care of Yourself When Your Job is Taking Care of Others:

Self-Care in a Service-Oriented Profession

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Introduction

After a decade in libraries, I've noticed that my life as a whole has had a major impact on my work. My personal and familial relationships, my politics, hobbies, appearance, outlook, and even my diet have all interacted with and influenced how I approach work relationships, projects, productivity, time management, and pretty much every other aspect of my job. When my personal life changed—for whatever reason—my work life would naturally reflect those changes. The reverse was also true: a stressful work week could ruin my ability to relax over the weekend, and perceived slights from coworkers could dominate dinner discussions. Slowly over time, I found that I couldn't fully separate my work self from my non-work self, a feeling that was exacerbated by seeing friend and follower requests from colleagues and work acquaintances on Facebook, Twitter,

and Instagram, places where I typically share more of my personal self than I do in the workplace.

This chapter explores some of what I found out about self-care as I transitioned from an early- to mid-career librarian. Maybe coincidentally, this transition took place alongside a broader transition in my life, from an insecure young adult to a slightly older, slightly less insecure adult. Throughout these changes, I learned from myself, from therapy, and from others about healthier ways to approach life and work, including establishing and enforcing boundaries, seeking out opportunities for personal growth, and figuring out which activities are helpful and productive in light of my personal short- and long-term goals. Along the way, I attempt to address how my privileges have helped me through this process—how being a cisgender, heterosexual man made it easier for me to say no to work tasks, seek out other areas of work, and prioritize my personal goals.

I don't profess to be an expert on personal well-being or mental health, and I generally encourage everyone I know, regardless of whether they feel happy or sad, content or dissatisfied, to try therapy to better understand themselves and their place in the world. One major discovery I have from the past ten years came from therapy: there are things within my control and there are things outside of my control. Sometimes, however, I'm not able to recognize where something fits within that dichotomy. Working on how I interpret actions and events, how I interact with others, and how and why I feel specific emotions in response to certain situations has helped me immensely in my work and life. Accordingly, I'm sharing my own experiences here so they may be beneficial to others facing similar challenges in library work.

A Very Brief History of Self-Care

I think I first came across "self-care" as a concept for personal betterment on social media sometime during the past five years. A cursory search of my online accounts shows a tweet of mine from August 2, 2017, "Self care is not selfish care," and a March 24 picture from the same year of a "Selfcare Sloth" stuffed animal (replete with official conference badge) featured during the 2017 Association of College & Research Libraries Annual Conference held in Baltimore, Maryland (see figure 13.1).

This sloth was most likely a well-intentioned attempt to promote healthy behaviors among conference attendees (with a bit

Figure 13.1

Selfcare Sloth. (Photo by author.)

of humor included), but it also points to self-care being a trending topic and pop culture buzzword at the time. In popular culture, entertainment, and on social media, self-care is often represented as self-pampering bordering on self-indulgence—a bubble bath with a glass of wine, a weekend spa trip, or the ostentatious "Treat Yo' Self" shopping sprees of Donna Meagle and Tom Haverford on the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*—rather than as an important practice for mental health and personal stability. Because of this superficial misrepresentation of self-care in modern society, the concept has suffered ridicule from some who believe it to be a capitalist, luxurious, and/or entirely self-indulgent enterprise. Additionally, self-care has been targeted mainly at women and turned into a commodity for the health and beauty industry through sales of self-care kits with bath bombs and body oils, or else included in shallow self-help guides as checklists of easy actions for fostering resilience.

These modern representations of self-care differ from the historical contexts of the term. Self-care has almost always been a political concept. It's a term that has been used to refer to different concepts for different communities over time, but in most of its uses, there has been some connection to political or social movements. In April 2017, just a few months after Donald Trump was sworn in as president of the United States, Aisha Harris wrote a wonderful article for *Slate* about the resurgence of self-care, detailing its historical use in medical communities, activist groups, holistic communities, and upper-class American society.[1] Throughout, Harris specifies how each group used the term in its own way but connects many of its uses to the idea that self-care is about community health as much as it is about the individual. The American Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Women's Liberation Movement, and others viewed self-care as a way to heal their communities in the face of oppressive forces, both by developing survival skills and establishing a baseline of preventative health care.

Prior to those social movements' use of the term, self-care was used mainly by physicians during the mid-twentieth century to describe what their patients could do for themselves without the guidance of medical professionals.[2] But according to Lowell Levin and Ellen Idler,[3] before medical communities seized on the term, the concept of self-care had a role in mid-nineteenth century feminism: "It was rooted in the traditional American values of self-reliant individualism, anti-elitism, popular democracy, common sense, and even nationalism." Some historians saw this notion of self-care arising as a response to social uncertainties of the time, which included a change in women's roles within the families.[4] (I can safely assume these historians mean upper-class white women.) Accordingly, they reason that "the confluence of changing women's roles, feminism, and a general interest in health matters in the nineteenth century, and similar configurations today [in 1983] suggest that these are socially logical responses to common problems."

When I first read about self-care on social media, I thought it was a way to take personal time to detach from others and responsibilities in order to recharge energy. So, in the course of researching and writing this chapter, it has been particularly interesting to read about this richer history of self-care that showcases the ways the term has been used to apply to community health. This lines up with my own thoughts and experiences with self-care: when I engage in behaviors that protect and revitalize me, I tend to have

a more positive impact on those around me. Promoting personal health also promotes community health.

Defining and Enforcing Boundaries

Personal boundaries are limitations that already exist for everyone, and acknowledging them is an important aspect of self-care. Some people explore their limits in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood and can clearly define, articulate, and enforce their physical, emotional, material, intellectual, relational, and time boundaries.[5] Others may not have had the wherewithal to establish boundaries, for whatever reasons. By the time I started working in libraries, I landed somewhere in between—I knew some of what I did not want to do (and how to avoid doing those things), but I also didn't know all of my limitations.

When I first heard about setting boundaries, I immediately thought it was an inherently negative concept, which in retrospect shows how much I needed them. Establishing rules for how others interacted with me sounded like setting up barriers to forming connections, so I wondered how it could ever enhance my relationships. Boundaries sounded selfish to me, and I was slow to acknowledge them. One perspective that helped me warm up to the idea of identifying and enforcing my boundaries came from a therapist who suggested that the work I did for myself might help others in addition to helping me. My therapist suggested that others who saw me prioritizing my boundaries over anything else may learn by my example and start defining and enforcing their own boundaries. I didn't see this as an end goal—being a role model for self-care—but I did consider it a bonus, and after learning about these concepts, I soon noticed that a colleague at work (whom I already respected) was someone with strong, healthy boundaries. So, it's possible I even learned some of this from them.

Therapy might be the best way to learn about boundaries, but there are also several popular guides to the topic. Mark Manson's guide[6] explains why boundaries are necessary, and I found it to be particularly useful for defining and enforcing healthy boundaries. Although Manson's article is focused on personal (romantic) relationships, I've found that a lot of the same advice works with professional relationships as well.

Over time, I was able to implement and maintain some boundaries that have been helpful. At one point in my career, after a promotion, I found myself working through lunches to try to keep up with the new responsibilities I thought I had. To be clear, no one at any of my workplaces has ever explicitly asked me to work through lunch breaks, but when I felt I had the responsibility to attend every meeting I was invited to, to finish projects by their deadlines, and to keep up with the constant waves of work that flood understaffed libraries, I didn't want the quality of my work to suffer. I also didn't want to take my work home with me, so I ended up eating at my desk or skipping meals altogether.

After a few years of being a librarian, though, I realized that the work was never-ending, that it's a marathon effort rather than a sprint, and that everyone else will be fine for sixty minutes while I eat a sandwich and take a walk outside. When I committed to taking my breaks every day, I realized that the impact of this decision on others was

minimal, while the impact on me was consistently positive. In fact, I could argue that the positive benefits I received from regularly taking my breaks reverberated outward to my colleagues—when I experienced less stress, I usually ended up being more patient and kinder to those around me.

Saying No

Making my meal breaks consistent forced me to rethink my approach to scheduling, and this meant slowly learning how to tactfully disengage from non-essential work requests. Time boundaries are especially difficult to enforce due to cultural pressures around productivity, which are embedded in common phrases like "being a team player" and "earning a living." It doesn't help that many libraries are understaffed and that many library boards like to see new, innovative initiatives and ever-rising numbers of interactions and acquisitions.

Early on in my first librarian position, the library system's director asked me to put together a seven-hour technology training workshop, to be delivered all in one day. Not only that, since I was supposed to train all of the county's staff, I had to conduct the workshop six times in one month. I tend to put a lot of planning time and energy into my instruction, and after my first workshop, I was so worn out that I remember going home at 6 p.m. and immediately going to sleep until the following morning (when I went back to work). At that point in my career, I didn't even consider the possibility that I could try to negotiate my workload to help maintain my mental and physical health. I might've asked to pare it down to half-day workshops, say, or find a co-presenter to take over half of the time. Instead, I did what I was told, thankful for the opportunity to break into the profession after six months of job searching after library school. But after years of forming bad habits in order to accomplish unrealistic work tasks, I slowly started pushing back.

The first major time I remember establishing a boundary against workload was an instance of job creep, a term that refers to employers pressuring their workers to take on duties beyond their established job roles. I had been promoted into an entirely new position but was asked to continue my prior work duties until a replacement for my previous position was found. Months later, an external candidate quickly came and went—hired to occupy my prior job, they lasted only two weeks before quitting. After a few more months with no changes to my workload, I began to realize that I was doing two full-time jobs—and doing both poorly. It took over a year and multiple instances of me politely but firmly stating my case for my workplace to reduce my load. The solution was not a new hire but a redistribution of my old duties to my colleagues. I thought this only kicked the job creep can further down the road, but after bringing up this issue of increasing workloads with the administration, I felt like I had done all I could do on this topic to advocate for myself and for others.

When I talk about standing up for myself, I acknowledge that I have a male privilege in doing so. Although women make up the majority of the library workforce, men still benefit from the entrenched workplace sexism that exists in libraries as it does in every industry. People in the library tend to listen when I speak up, I've been in supervisory and leadership roles (promoted ahead of women who had been working at the same

institution longer than me), and simply being a male most likely helped me (a) get a job at a public library, fresh out of graduate school, with no prior library work experience (outside of an internship), and (b) get a job at an academic library with only public library experience—no publications and no experience with instruction. In receiving jobs working with educational technology, I must've also benefited from the unfounded stereotype that men are better at working with technology. All of this means that while I found it difficult to establish time boundaries and to say no to work requests, I have a feeling that for women it must be even harder because of cultural pressures for women to be agreeable and accommodating.

Time Management

Scheduling consistent meal breaks and saying no to onerous requests was a start, but to further revolutionize how I approached work, I knew I also needed to develop healthy habits with my overall time management. This not only involved being more cognizant of scheduling work appointments but also being more aware of what I was doing immediately before and after work. Should I stay up until 2 a.m. finishing the last fifty pages of a riveting book the night before I have a series of important work meetings and presentations? Could I realistically use my lunch hour to run errands and still have time to eat? Would going to the gym directly after work keep me on track for my fitness goals, or would it make me feel rushed before my dinner plans?

Answering these questions allowed me to conceptualize my work as being a piece of my life that has to operate in concert with my basic needs and extracurricular interests. It also showed me that many of the habits I was trying to build applied equally to my work life and my non-work life: blocking out time for cooking and cleaning at home made it easier to realize that I needed to schedule time on my work calendar to accomplish my routine tasks (like organizing files) and to further my work on projects. This was a piece of advice I saw on social media: just because you do not have an appointment on your calendar for a block of time doesn't necessarily mean you are "free" during that time. Safeguarding my time by not scheduling back-to-back meetings, not scheduling consultations the minute I got back from lunch, and being more deliberate in broadcasting my truly free time helped me gain some mental space. Additionally, using a scheduling app (like FreeBusy, Calendly, or Doodle) that integrated with my work calendar saved me the time and mental effort I had previously spent responding to emails about my availability.

I'll admit now, with apologies to any reader-colleagues who may have been affected by this, that I have declined or skipped meetings that I thought I could not meaningfully contribute to and that would not benefit my work. Some prevailing, generic work wisdom touted by well-meaning go-getters is to say yes to every opportunity and try to be in the room where decisions are made. These aphorisms make sense for me up to a point—that point usually being when my spirit is completely drained from five or more hours of meetings in a single day. It took me a while, but eventually I realized (with much relief) that I could cancel my own weekly standing meetings with the unit I supervise if those meetings ended up being wedged between four other appointments that day. Everyone's capacity and boundaries will be different, though; some may feel energized by meetings

and accomplished by attending them. It was necessary for me to reflect on what was important to me in my work—helping patrons and colleagues learn new things about technology, researching topics I'm passionate about, and contributing to the profession—for me to start figuring out what I could trim from my work without sacrificing my values.

Overall, I've realized that adequately managing my personal time made managing my work time easier (and vice versa). I've benefited a great deal from conceptualizing my work time as being a portion of my life that needs to be managed in conjunction with my non-work time. Fortunately, I have had the privilege of being a part of understanding workplaces that usually do not require communication outside of regularly scheduled work hours. We're all much more than library workers—we're multifaceted people with personal lives and interests outside of work, so it's helpful to keep in mind that good time management habits are not really meant to improve work productivity but to improve the overall quality of your life.

Pursuing Personal Growth Alongside Professional Development

Our profession emphasizes lifelong learning, and various organizations provide free and paid opportunities for professional development, but as we sign up for webinars and acquire new skills, we should also consider what we need for personal growth. We should recognize that "work-life balance" is a continual process,[7] like engaging in a hobby rather than a mindless task to be done and then forgotten about, like taking out the trash. When I started as a librarian, I didn't have a clear idea of what area of library work I was interested in, nor did I know what I needed to sustain myself, personally, throughout my career. In terms of the work, I saw that librarians had specialties and that they might participate in organizations and serve on committees, conduct research, present at conferences, and publish their work. I formed a habit of reaching out to librarians I didn't know personally for different perspectives, which often helped me understand what I might expect from certain training programs, organizational appointments, or other opportunities. I found formal and informal mentorships along the way (with thanks to Dr. Michelle Kazmer, Jacquelyn Daniel, and Jamal Fisher for providing a huge amount of emotional labor on my behalf) and offered my help to others wherever possible.

In addition to teaching me about the practicalities of work, my mentors also helped me to grow personally in the ways that I needed to. They reminded me to advocate for myself, take my lunch breaks, use my paid time off, and try to enforce the limits of my working hours wherever possible. Many librarians are salaried employees, and the barriers between work and home can break down quickly if we don't manage our own (and others') expectations for what can realistically be done in a working week. My personal development was a gradual process that involved making a lot of mistakes, like taking on too many projects at once, not delegating enough work to the employees I supervised, and spending too much time trying to perfect details for things that did not require perfect results. As a mid-career librarian, I now realize that much of the pressure to perform was coming from myself. While there were certainly periods of stress caused by others who

had procrastinated too much or mismanaged projects with imminent deadlines, I often-times felt personally responsible for providing excellent services to my colleagues and patrons, even when it negatively impacted my personal life. But now, after establishing myself in the career, I feel empowered to take care of myself alongside my patrons and to slow down and focus on what I need so I can sustain my energy, interests, and personal identity outside of my work. As I mentioned above, appropriately managing my time, identifying and enforcing my boundaries, and saying no to some opportunities helped me grow and sustain myself.

In terms of finding my niche in library work, I realized that I'd approached life by sampling a little bit of everything, but sometimes I didn't stop to figure out which activities I actually enjoyed and which ones I wanted to invest myself in. In the way that any hobby—collecting, gardening, cooking, playing an instrument—is a fun journey without a clear endpoint, I think librarianship can and should be viewed similarly. Of course, there will always be aspects of a job that are not entertaining but are necessary—timesheets, scheduling, and annual reports come to mind—but I've found that there will sometimes be opportunities to explore the interests I have and incorporate them into my work. This process can combine personal interests with professional duties, but it relies on introspection and reflection, which is aided, again, by therapy and through meditation, journaling, talking with librarian peers at other institutions, and discussing work with friends and family. The narratives we construct about ourselves and our work are powerful and revelatory. When someone asks about your work, do you immediately downplay it (like I used to)? Or do you start energetically talking about your favorite aspects of your work? It might depend on the week, as it does for me. Overall, I have taken time to figure out what I enjoy most about my work, make concerted efforts to nourish those areas, and cut back on other aspects of work wherever possible. This has probably helped me avoid a few existential work crises over the years (although I've had a couple of those anyway).

One other thing I've learned about opportunities for professional development is from serving on committees and reviewing grant applications: sometimes there are not as many applicants for these things as the organizers would've hoped. Although I've been privileged in having connections for certain opportunities—becoming a reviewer for a journal when a professor I knew was the editor and being invited to publish in a venue a friend was in charge of—many of the scholarships, jobs, and appointments I've received were based on merit or luck (or a mixture of the two). Sometimes after receiving opportunities, I found out that there had not been a very large applicant pool. Accordingly, I've developed a mindset of not being hesitant to apply for things that align with my interests: I'll receive them or not, and either way there will be more and different opportunities in the future. I have been passed over for so many things that I've lost count. I applied to more than 100 jobs after my undergraduate studies, and I spent my first five years in librarianship submitting applications to serve on committees for professional organizations before receiving an invitation to serve. So, understanding that there will always be new and exciting opportunities has helped me feel better about the ones I didn't receive.

Aligning Actions with Goals

Beyond establishing boundaries and pursuing personal growth alongside professional development, another activity that has helped me in mid-career librarianship relates back to viewing my work as being only one part of my life experiences. I like to reflect on what I'm doing with my work and how it lines up with what I want to get out of life.

Growing up, I discovered that I enjoyed expressing myself through music, but as a teenager, I decided not to pursue being a professional musician. I preferred the thought of a stable job with clear-cut hours and health insurance to the idea of making my fun activity my life's work. Similarly, now, when I think about what I'm doing with librarianship, I try to contextualize it: Do I want a job with additional responsibilities, even if that means working longer hours and blurring the lines between my work and my free time? Can I find a way to advance in my career that doesn't require that? Do I even need to advance, be more productive, or be more connected, or am I comfortable with what I'm doing now?

These types of reflections have helped me to recognize my goals and to align my work and life activities around them. My main goal in librarianship is connecting people with information while maintaining an identity outside of work. So, I've pursued scholarships, grants, and activities that supply me with training, opportunities to conduct research, and subject-specific knowledge to help me achieve that goal. But I also try to balance my responsibilities so that I'm not taking on too many activities at any one time. And along the way, I've taken note of any obstacles that tend to stand in the way of my main goal. Sometimes activities labeled as professional service took up more bandwidth than I thought I could afford. For me, work is a continual balancing act between the two extremes of being a selfish hedonist, pursuing only what brings me joy, and being a selfless masochist, prioritizing others' needs above mine. I think my balancing act between these two exaggerated endpoints resembles being empathetic and kind to others, which includes some level of voluntary work that is helpful to my peers and the profession at large, while still mainly pursuing the things that interest me within the profession.

Sometimes when I'm confused about my goals or overwhelmed by my work, I like to think about what is actually within my control, which often helps to reduce stress and anxiety. As I mentioned earlier, this is a very helpful introspective practice that I picked up in therapy: I may have unconsciously known what was out of my control before I started therapy, but directly acknowledging it and keeping it in mind helped me feel better about my work performance and expectations. I've found that I have a great deal of control over my behavior and my responses to others' behaviors. I can feel overwhelmed by the amount of work I have, choose to voice that with my supervisor (or not), and temper my response to their decision of what to do about the situation. But I don't have any control over how my supervisor responds to a situation, how a coworker contributes (or not) to a group project, or how many people read (or ignore) my detailed emails on complicated workplace issues. Other areas of work fall in between these two extremes: I have a fair amount of control over my own weekly scheduling and time management practices, but there are some appointments I must keep; I can usually pursue new personal projects that I'm interested in, but sometimes I'm assigned to things I'm not enthusiastic about;

and I can sometimes choose whom I collaborate with, but I'm often placed in specific working groups.

When I started as a librarian, I said yes to every opportunity, working on grants, pursuing scholarships, and spreading myself too thin across various projects. I think being promoted quickly from a new librarian to a library manager only encouraged my tendency to take on too much work. Now that I've had time to observe library spaces, workers, and administrations, I have a better understanding of the expectations in library work and of what can realistically be accomplished. I feel like I'm in a place now where I'm no longer working to achieve the next milestone, whether it be a degree, certificate, scholarship, committee appointment, promotion, or professional recognition, but am pursuing what I find to be personally enriching and rewarding. This can be helping a student learn about a new topic, planning an exciting library event, or collaborating with peers on a project of shared interest, but the important aspect of it is that I do it for myself and not for recognition or approval from others.

Conclusion

I think what I have done to better care for myself improves not only my own work experience but also that of my colleagues. While some coworkers might be irritated with me for not responding to emails within a certain timeframe or for not scheduling meetings before 11 a.m. on Wednesdays, others might see me establishing and enforcing boundaries and may follow my lead, enriching their own work experiences along the way.

It hasn't been easy, though. Contrary to what you see in popular culture, self-care is not just about sipping a glass of wine while taking a hot bubble bath. It often involves confronting personal issues, discovering your limitations, being honest with yourself, and committing to changes that may be very uncomfortable to implement in the short term and very difficult to maintain in the long run.

Despite having boundaries, pursuing personal growth, and aligning my life and work activities with my short- and long-term goals, I have still found it difficult to continually balance my work with my self-care. But no matter how much extra work it takes and how uncomfortable it can be at times, I think it's a worthwhile pursuit. I may not have thought this way when I had lower self-esteem—when I was convinced I had to sacrifice myself over and over again for my work—but now when I think about a long career in libraries as opposed to whatever current success or failure I'm experiencing, I realize that for me self-preservation is much more important than achievements in the long run.

It's important for me to note that this approach doesn't necessarily preclude empathy. I may need to occasionally skip lunch to help someone in need, for example, or temporarily share a colleague's duties without recompense when they feel overwhelmed. Overall, however, self-care means setting myself up for long-term success by acknowledging and respecting my goals and limitations. In doing so, I hope it will help me to avoid burnout, enhance my work relationships, combat boredom, and stave off apathy.

Notes

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5. Lisa Catallo, "Six Areas for Healthy Boundaries," *Lisa Catallo Counseling* (blog), August 16, 2019, https://www.lisacatallocounselling.com/blogarticles/areasforboundaries.
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